R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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A COMPARISON OF THE POETRY SELECTIONS IN SIX LITERATURE ANTHOLOGY SERIES.

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PUB DATE JAN 68

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.36 7P.

DESCRIPTORS- *ANTHOLOGIES, *COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *LITERATURE, *POETRY, SECONDARY EDUCATION, ENGLISH CURRICULUM, TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI,

THE TWO PURPOSES OF THIS INVESTIGATION WERE TO TEST THE IMPLICATION THAT POEMS USED IN ANTHOLOGIES ARE SELECTED LARGELY BY CHANCE, AND TO COMPARE THE POETRY SELECTIONS IN SIX WELL-KNOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL LITERATURE ANTHOLOGIES TO DETERMINE THEIR EXTENT OF AGREEMENT ABOUT WHICH POEMS SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE CURRICULUM. THE SIX ANTHOLOGIES CONTAINED (1) AN AVERAGE OF 464 POEMS APIECE, WITH 1,746 DIFFERENT POEMS USED IN ALL SIX SERIES, 70 PERCENT OF WHICH WERE DUPLICATED IN ONE OTHER SERIES, AND 1 PERCENT IN ALL SIX, (2) THE WORK OF 454 POETS, WITH DICKINSON, FROST, SANDBURG, SHAKESPEARE, AND WHITMAN, IN THAT ORDER, CONTRIBUTING THE LARGEST NUMBER OF POEMS, AND (3) 139 POEMS USED FOUR OR MORE TIMES, ONLY 53 OF WHICH WERE PLACED AT THE SAME GRADE LEVEL EACH TIME. THE PREDOMINANT PATTERN INDICATED THAT (1) ANTHOLOGY COMPILERS DISAGREE AS TO WHAT CONSTITUTES A GOOD POETRY CURRICULUM FOR GRADES 7-12, AND NO METHODOLOGY EXISTS AS TO HOW TO FIND OUT, (2) RECENT AMERICAN POETS ARE HEAVILY FAVORED, SUGGESTING A NEED FOR CHANGED EMPHASIS IN ENGLISH-TEACHER EDUCATION, AND (3) NO READABILITY FORMULA HAS BEEN DEVISED TO TEST THE COMPARATIVE DIFFICULTY OF POEMS AND TO DETERMINE AT WHICH GRADE LEVEL PARTICULAR POEMS CAN BEST BE UNDERSTOOD--A MUCH-NEEDED AREA OF RESEARCH. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "MISSOURI ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOL. 25 (JANUARY 1968), 11"16.) (JB)

ED019281

MISSOURI *English Bulletin*

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JANUARY 1968

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A COMPARISON OF THE POETRY SELECTIONS IN SIX LITERATURE ANTHOLOGY SERIES

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Enumerable articles and chapters in textbooks have been written on the problems encountered in introducing and teaching poetry to junior and senior high students. Many people have attested to the fact that the teaching of poetry as a form of literature is not an easy task and various reasons have been suggested as causes for the difficulty.

One source of difficulty that has frequently been mentioned is concerned with the selection of poems for use in the secondary school literature program. The assertion has been made that too much of the secondary school poetry curriculum has been selected by women for girls. Dwight L. Burton has maintained that this reasoning is unsound because "poems are not as much selected as they are found"[1] in literature anthologies.

This investigation was planned and conducted to test Burton's implication that the selection of specific poems for use in an anthology is largely a matter of chance. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to compare the poetry selections of a number of secondary school literature anthology series to determine the extent to which there is agreement among anthology compilers as to what

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1. Dwight L. Burton, *Literature Study in the High Schools* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 210.

poetry should be included in the curriculum. The investigator was further interested in determining whether there was uniformity among different anthology series with respect to where certain often used poems should be placed in the curriculum.

Procedure

Six literature anthology series designed for use in Grades 7 through 12 were selected for the comparative study of poetry selections. The six series chosen for analysis were:

The Ginn Literature Series, Ginn and Company, 1967
Our Reading Heritage Series, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963
Prose and Poetry Series, L. W. Singer Company, 1963
Worlds of Literature Series, American Book Company, 1963
America Reads Series, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1963
Adventures in Literature, Laureate Edition, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963

A list of all poems introduced at the six grade levels was made for each series. Then a master card file was built from these six separate lists. For each poem found in any of the six series, a card was made listing the title of the selection and the poet. Then the name of each series which included the poem and the grade level where it was introduced was placed on the card.

Two special types of problems were encountered in following this procedure. It was found that some series included certain poems in more than one place in their programs. When these situations were encountered, both grade levels were listed for the series on the poem cards.

The other special problem concerned one of the anthology series analyzed. This series included two different types of poetry selections. Some poems included were to be introduced by the teacher and then read by the students while other selections were included as supplementary reading only. For the purposes of this study, both types of selections were considered together as constituting the poetry curriculum for that series.

Findings

1. The six anthology series analyzed introduced an average of 464 poems in their total poetry curriculum for Grades 7 through 12. However, a total of 1,746 different poems were found in the six series which is indicative of great variation among the series in the selection of particular poems. Of the 1,746 different poems, 1,217

or approximately 70 per cent of the total number were found in only one of the six series while only 25 or approximately 1 per cent of the total number of poems were found introduced in all six series.

2. A tally was also made of the number of different poets whose selections were included in the six anthology series. A total of 454 different poets were represented and Table 1 contains data regarding the ten poets who had the largest number of different poems chosen for use in the six series.

Table 1

Poets Having The Largest Number of Different Poems Used in Six Anthology Series

Poet	Number of Different Poems
Emily Dickinson	48
Robert Frost	48
Carl Sandburg	35
William Shakespeare	35
Walt Whitman	34
Ogden Nash	31
Henry W. Longfellow	30
Edna St. Vincent Millay	26
Phyllis McGinley	20
Alfred Tennyson	20

3. Those poems found in four or more of the anthology series were studied further to determine whether there appeared to be agreement on the grade placement of these selections. A total of 139 different poems were found included in four or more of the series and 53 of these were placed at the same grade level by all series which included them. Of the 53 poems on which there was such agreement, 43 were placed unanimously in Grade 12 while 10 were unanimously placed in Grade 11.

A number of the 139 poems included in four or more anthologies were found to have a great range in grade placement. Table 2 contains data regarding 11 such poems for which there was a range of four or more grades in placement.

Conclusions and Discussion

1. The data concerning the total number of different poems

Table 2

Poems Included in Four or More Anthology
Series Which Had Wide Ranges in Grade Placement

Poet	Poem	Grade Placement in The Six Series					
		A	B	C	D	E	F
R. and S. Benet	"Western Wagons"		7	10	9		8
R. Browning	"Incident of the French Camp"			7	8	10	9
E. Dickinson	"I Never Saw a Moor"			8	7	9	11
R. Frost	"Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening"	11	10	11	7	11	8+11
R. Frost	"The Road Not Taken"		9	10	11	10	7+11
O. Goldsmith	"Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog"	9	8		7		12
W. E. Henley	"Invictus"	12	10	7	9		9
J. Masefield	"Sea Fever"	8	10	10	8	7+12	9
E. A. Poe	"Annabel Lee"		8	9	9+11	11	7
W. Scott	"Lochinvar"	12	7	9	7	8	8
E. Wylie	"Velvet Shoes"	8	11	10	9	10	11

included in the six anthology series indicate that by far the most predominant pattern in poetry selection is one of individual choices being made by compilers of a given anthology series. There would appear to be little agreement on what should constitute the poetry curriculum for the secondary schools.

It is probably unrealistic to expect perfect agreement among compilers as to what should constitute poetry curriculum for the secondary schools but one does wonder if perhaps more agreement than now exists should be expected. Burton's comment cited earlier seems to be borne out by the evidence gathered in this study. Perhaps reasons for this lack of any substantial agreement can be found in the lack of clearly defined objectives in teaching poetry and our lack of empirical evidence as to how best to proceed methodologically.

2. The data concerning the poets whose works are found most often in literature anthologies indicate a pattern of drawing upon certain American writers of a late nineteenth and twentieth century vintage. These findings should have implications for those people responsible for designing the academic preparation of an English teacher. If one can accept the premise that a teacher will be better able to guide students in their reading and understanding of a poem if she is rather thoroughly acquainted with what has been said about the poet and the poem, then these data indicate the need for academic preparation in so-called "modern" American poetry. (That is, of course, if the anthology is *the* literature program which in perhaps too many cases it is.)

3. Perhaps even more disturbing is the data regarding the grade placements of those poems which are found in a majority of the anthology series. What little agreement there is seems to be reserved for Grades 11 and 12 where the typical pattern is a chronological arrangement of American and English literature.

The examples presented of poems displaying wide ranges of grade placement deserve careful thought. One wonders if these poems are equally well placed at these various grade levels. The problem is, however, that there is a dearth of evidence regarding the comparative difficulty of poems. Standard readability formulas were not designed for and cannot be used to assess the level of difficulty for poems.

Here then appears to be a needed area of research. Studies could be designed and conducted to determine at which grade levels

particular poems can be read and understood by the majority of students. The end result of such studies might eventually be the development of a readability formula which could be applied to new poems to determine where they should be placed in the secondary school literature curriculum.

Certainly the present state of affairs with such gaps of knowledge is not an ideal situation. It will do very little good to include a poem at a particular grade level because it fits nicely into a thematic unit if large numbers of students at that level cannot read the poem.